

BEFORE AFTER

"What does that convey to you?"

"Oh -- er -- " I evaded the question. She certainly had a wonderful pair of afters, they provocatively wiggled whenever she walked away. As for the before --

"Come, come," broke in Skewling testily. "You are not trying. Surely you must have some thoughts on the matter."

I had indeed, but reluctantly put them aside. "Oh, something like one of those ads. You know. She couldn't wear a low-backed dress until her friend told her of Looote's Anti-Pimple Lotion. Then came romance. Or a couple of cats: one a miserable old bag of mange licking his sores, the other a bright, happy, 'with it' super-puss, the result of having just polished off a helping of Purry-Furry Pet Food. That sort of thing."

"You have the mentality of a charwoman," said Skewling coldly. "That is just what my daily said when I put the question to her. Only in her case it was backache pills." He made an irritated gesture. "Can't you see that all such associations are accidental and have no real bearing on the matter? You should learn to look only at the essentials and work with those."

"But that is just the difficulty," I said. "The frosted glass -- "

Skewling waved this aside. "Take for example this problem in dynamics. A ball is flung into the air at a given angle and with a certain initial velocity." His eye rocketed. "Where does it go? You don't need to be told anything about the colour of the ball or the material of which it is made, who throws it or what reasons he may have for doing so. All that is irrelevant."

"Don't you believe it," I retorted. "The black-rubber ones are harder. It's so their teeth won't sink in. As for the -- "

"You are insane," interrupted Skewling. "I have often suspected it. Your mind rambles. However, make an effort." He tapped his card, "BEFORE -- AFTER. It is just a matter of relative position, whether in space or in time needn't concern us. The meaning leaps to the mind and may be crystallized in one short double-sentence." He displayed a second card:

BEFORE comes before AFTER AFTER comes after BEFORE

"This," he said, "I call the First Clarifexpansion of the original statement."

"The First Clarifexpansion?" I repeated warily.

"Assuredly," said Skewling. "As with the calculus, you can obtain a whole series of derivatives, learning more about the original function each time. My First Clarifexpansion clarifies by bringing into the open and expanding what lies compressed and implicit in the original statement. But why stop there?"

"Why indeed?" I echoed, looking round for a way of escape. "I suppose your charwoman isn't due, is she?"

Skewling clicked his tongue. "You must really try to control your mental processes," he said severely. "They stray like sheep." He emitted a sudden barking laugh. "Perhaps you should buy a brain-dog!"

His attempts at humour were so rare that I thought for a moment it was hydrophobia coming on. All the same, out of the mouths -- "Perhaps I will," I said. What better reason could I have for collecting hard black-rubber dog-balls and losing them in the area for strong-armed youngsters to find?

"Clarifexpand again," went on Skewling, "and we arrive at a much more explicit formulation. One surprisingly pregnant with possibilities." He fished among his papers and drew out a third and larger card. "Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him, as Dracula says."

"It was Methusaleh's leech," I corrected. I looked at the new card in horror. It ran:

BEFORE comes before comes before AFTER AFTER comes after
 BEFORE comes before AFTER AFTER comes after BEFORE
 comes after BEFORE BEFORE comes comes before before AFTER
 AFTER comes after BEFORE before AFTER AFTER comes after
 BEFORE comes after BEFORE comes BEFORE comes before comes
 before AFTER AFTER comes after BEFORE AFTER AFTER
comes after BEFORE comes after BEFORE comes before BEFORE
comes before AFTER comes before AFTER comes after BEFORE
 AFTER comes after BEFORE comes after BEFORE comes before
 AFTER BEFORE comes before AFTER AFTER comes before
comes after BEFORE comes after BEFORE comes after BEFORE
comes before AFTER AFTER BEFORE comes before AFTER
 AFTER comes comes before after BEFORE after BEFORE comes

after BEFORE comes before AFTER AFTER comes before
comes before AFTER AFTER comes after comes before BEFORE
 BEFORE comes after BEFORE comes before AFTER AFTER
comes after

"Which of us did you say was insane?" I asked, crossing my eyes to see if the gnat was still there.

Skewling ignored this. "As with legal documents," he explained, "punctuation has been omitted to obviate ambiguity. One must be clear at all costs."

I just looked at him.

"Our First Clarifexpansion gives a complete positioning of the two words forming our original statement. The above Second Clarifexpansion is complete only as regards the relative positions of any two portions of our First Clarifexpansion as might result from a bisection. But an eight-word sentence can be divided into as many as eight parts, and may be divided into a lesser number in many different ways. Further, we ought to introduce some notation designed to differentiate between the various repeated words, BEFORE, AFTER and comes. All this would enormously enlarge our Second Clarifexpansion."

"I'm sure it would," I murmured.

"Indeed, the problem is so complex," went on Skewling, "that I have not yet succeeded in solving it. So far, a really clear and fully expanded Second Clarifexpansion eludes me."

"Tut-tut," I said. "A pity." He nodded.

"However, we need not despair. It will come. As for a Third Partial Clarifexpansion, based on bisection only, that is easy. The 140-word statement of our Second Clarifexpansion expands into 139 double-sentences each of 284 words, making 39476 words in all." He dragged out from among his lumber a huge roll of paper and began to unwind it. "I have here --"

I sprang to my feet. "Don't bother," I said. I had been reminded of my concealed binoculars. "Got to see a man about a dog. And buy a couple of dozen hard black-rubber balls for it to play with."

Skewling looked at me in sorrow, shaking his silvery mane. "Don't you think," he suggested, "that a few biscuits perhaps --"

or some meat -- "

"Oh, no!" I smiled at him while giving my head a hasty polish with the velvet shoe-pad I always used before putting on my air-raid warden's helmet. (Yes, I know the war is over, but not the one between me and Nora.) "They would only bounce off. You don't understand pets. It's a matter of dynamics really, followed by clarifexpansion of the image. I hope. If she isn't holding a towel. Pip-pip!"

And, do you know, she wasn't. If only Nora hadn't chosen just that moment to come in with a tack-hammer. Talk about making things plain!

Editor's Note: J. A. Lindon, termed by Martin Gardner "the most skillful composer of English palindromes" and "England's best writer of comic verse", died on December 16, 1979. Although he contributed a number of logological articles to Word Ways in the early 1970s -- articles which viewed words as collections of letters to manipulate, as in "The Seven Sixes Problem" and "A New Pentomino Puzzle", or sounds to juggle, as in "Stutterances" -- the foregoing spoof of academic linguistics was wordplay much closer to his heart, and therefore serves as a more fitting memorial.

As I have said before, I am no logologist, I have just about no interest in words qua words, only when used for the purpose of conveying meaning or emotion ... The Skewling piece illustrates this attitude ... The two words BEFORE -- AFTER, as they stand, express a meaning that is at once evident. 'Clarifexpanded', even into Skewling's first 8-word sentence, they become a little worrying and confusing, and when he repeats the process, lunatic logic (prevails), although technically, of course, the paragraph only expresses correctly the relative positions of its various parts. You may well not be in much agreement with me here, but I sha'n't budge: except when used to convey something, words are more or less dead!

Words, to me, are of interest only when something is done with them, so that, for example, when handed a list of all the words in Webster ending with X, I feel inclined only to bung it on the fire unlooked-at; whereas when someone tells me that the music of the shoe-horn is written in foot-notes, I grin delightedly and remember it for ever.

I cannot feel much sympathy with .. the attitude .. that anything that is in Webster is somehow marvellous by virtue of being there... To me, an out-of-the-way word is useless; simply mental lumber. If there were any need for it, it would be used already; to use it is to drag it in, and then your listeners or readers will have to ask what it means and you will have to tell them; it would have been more sensible to say something else or the same thing in some other way.